

Project Home: ‘Big Wave’ Community To House Special Needs Adults In Half Moon Bay After Decades-Long Battle

By [Susie Steimle](#) December 17, 2020 at 12:01 am

HALF MOON BAY (KPIX 5) – After two decades of public pushback, a community for developmentally disabled adults is finally being built in Half Moon Bay.

“I mean, there’s no housing crisis this bad anywhere,” said Jeff Peck, the CEO of [Big Wave](#) and parent of a special needs adult.

For Peck, the quest to find housing for his now 32-year-old daughter Elizabeth started when she was just a baby. “My wife and I knew after she was born, that there was something not going on, not going right,” Peck said.

“She kept missing milestones,” Kim Gainza, a Big Wave board member and parent of a special needs adult said. “I had friends who had babies about the same time, and they were laughing and she wasn’t. And they were reaching for things and she wasn’t,” Gainza said.

It’s a worry specific to parents with special needs children. Not long after they’re born, their parents become concerned with a major question: “What happens to them when you die?” “There’s no housing for them, so it’s critical that this need be addressed,” Julie Shenkman said. Shenkman is also a parent of a special needs adult, Sam.

“Well, just to give you an idea, 76% of all the adults with special needs live with their parents. Their parents are getting old; they’re getting into their 70s, 80s. When their parents go, they have no place to live,” Peck said.

So Peck, a contractor who owns a large plot of land in Half Moon Bay, decided to do something about that. He’s now the CEO and founder of the [Big Wave Housing Project](#). The community will house 63 adults with disabilities.



Big Wave, a community for special needs adults, being built in Half Moon Bay. (CBS)

Julie Shenkman and her husband Paul own Sam’s Chowder House in Half Moon Bay. They named the restaurant after their son. At 19, he’s excited not just to be able to live independently, but also to work at the Big Wave.

“I’m going to have my own cafe. Yeah, it’s going to be cool,” he said.

“It’s not just housing. It’s also recreation; it’s purpose,” Julie Shenkman said.

In addition to the existing farm on-site there will be a cafe, a culinary institute, and other commercial spaces to help sustain this project. Tenants can sign 105-year leases and each unit will cost around \$800 a month.

“Nobody’s going to stop me from giving my daughter what she should have,” Peck said.

But getting here wasn’t easy. “There are a lot of regulations to build here on the coast,” Julie Shenkman said.

Emmy Gainza, 29, has Williams syndrome, a rare neurodevelopmental genetic disorder. She’s going to live at Big Wave and spoke at four of 34 public meetings starting back in 1999. She says the pushback was personal.

“We’ve heard what everyone has said about us. What if it was your child, you know? What if your child was getting bullied because of this? How would you feel?” Gainza asked.

There are around 4.8 million developmentally disabled adults in the United States, 80% of them live with an adult caregiver. In San Mateo County, the challenge isn’t just building on the coast; it’s being able to build at all. There simply is not enough housing for this population. Another option is a government-funded group home, which means at least a five-year wait.

“They’ll get shipped out to Fresno, there’ll be ripped out of their community. Not that Bakersfield or Fresno are bad, don’t get me wrong. It’s just that’s the only place that some of these group homes can afford to operate,” Peck said.

Instead, by the spring of 2022, Emmy and Elizabeth will be roommates at Big Wave. The first group of special needs adults expects to move in at the end of 2021.

For 20 years, these parents have fought to help their children live independently and leave home. But that doesn’t make it any easier when they actually do. “The separation is going to be very hard,” Paul Shenkman said.

“We’re never ready. We’re never ready to let our kids go,” Julie Shenkman said.

“I’m going to volunteer as the janitor because as the janitor, you’re always around. I’ll be here every week,” Peck said. Peck hopes this project can be replicated for special needs communities across the country.